A MISDIRECTED LETTER.

Served to Put a Few Ideas in the Head of an Old Bachelor.

By SUSAN BROWN ROBBINS.

The postmaster smiled a little when he passed out the mail, but Luther Wilkins did not notice. He was trying to remember whether it was a yeast cake or a pound of cheese he had meant to get at the store. He went out of the postoffice still pondering and ended by forgetting both articles, his attention being diverted by the sight of two boys playing marbles on the sidewalk. This was the first sign of spring Luther had seen, so it was no wonder that his memory played him false.

After he got home and had eaten his supper he thought of the mail in his overcoat pocket. He brought it to the table and sat down to examine it. There was the weekly, a county paper, a poultry journal, an agricultural monthly and last of all a letter.

"Well, now," said Luther, picking it up, "I wonder who's been writing to me. I don't know when I've had a letter."

He looked at it eagerly, held it nearer his eyes, then farther off. He removed his glasses and polished them in nervous haste. After replacing them on his nose he picked up the letter again and scanned it narrowly, then he looked over his glasses as if at some person and said:

"I snum!"

He sank into a reverie, out of which he roused himself with a start to study the envelope with renewed interest.

"Mrs. Luther Wilkins," he said. "Mrs. Luther Wilkins. And I an old bachelor who never so much as hardly thought of getting married! Mrs. Luther Wilkins, why, where is she? And who is she?

"Well, I guess I'll see what's in it." He inserted the point of his knife under the corner of the envelope flap, then he hesitated.

"What business have I opening of her letters?" he asked himself. "I never did open other folks' letters, and I guess I won't begin now." He rose to his feet and carrying it to the mantelpiece leaned it up against the clock.

He settled himself to his papers, but thoughts of Mrs. Luther Wilkins kept intruding on what he was reading about patent nest-boxes, and under-draining, and the news of the village.

Thereafter, during all his waking hours, Mrs. Luther Wilkins was often in his thoughts. She even haunted his dreams at times. He wondered what she was like, and he thought of the kind of woman he would wish her to be, and enjoyed himself very much in imagining how it would seem to have her meet him at the door when he came in from the fields, and how nice it would be not to have to get his own meals.

At first he was a little cynical and told himself that the imagining was much more satisfactory than the reality would be, but after awhile he changed his mind, and would sigh heavily when he came into his lonesome house.

The letter by the clock, too, began to trouble him. He had a devouring curiosity to see what was in it, and besides it did not seem just right to keep it so long before delivering it.

One evening in June Luther put on his best clothes and walked three miles to see an old schoolmate who had an unmarried cousin living with him. It seemed to him that Eliza Elliott fitted in exactly with his idea of Mrs. Luther Wilkins. He came home quite early very much disappointed. Eliza wouldn't do at all.

He worked doggedly for a month, trying hard to think of the disquieting subject. It was no use, and toward the end of July it was observed that Luther was becoming very neighborly. He spent his evenings at different neighbors' houses, he accepted invitations to tea, he went to church regularly and to all Sunday-school picnics. And still he could not find a suitable owner for the letter.

"I must be terrible fussy," he sighed, "I've got acquainted with about all the women in town; they're nice women, every one of them, but somehow they don't suit me. I guess I'll have to give up beat."

It was one cold, raw day in early November that Luther sat at a window making clumsy attempts at mending a pair of very ragged socks. Happening to glance across the road he saw a woman out in the Hammond yard. She was busy raking up the fallen autumn leaves.

"Letitia Hammond," Luther commented, Bill Hammond's sister. We don't see much of her lately. She don't even go to church, there's so many of Bill's children to look after, and Bill's wife is so took up with her clubs and things. It's hard on Letitia, but she never finds a word of fault."

The sock he was mending fell to the floor and the wooden egg inside it struck with such a loud bang that the cat started in its sleep. Luther did not notice. He was standing at the window staring out.

"'That is best which lieth nearest,'" he said solemnly. "What a fool I've been."

He found his hat and left the house, almost running across the road. He took the iron rake away from Letitia gently. "That's too hard work for a little thing like you," he said.

Letitia's blue eyes were full of wonder, but she yielded up the rake weakly.

"You'd better go into the house, too," said Luther. "It's cold out here."

No one had been thoughtful of her before for a long time and Letitia couldn't understand it. When Luther returned the rake she asked him to let her do something for him.

He carried her his best pair of socks. She was horrified at their condition and mended them in a very artistic manner.

Luther looked at them in wonder and reverence. "I'll never wear 'em," he said, when he was at home again. "I wouldn't have let her do it only I knew it would make her feel better, and it gave me a chance to see her, too."

He found that it was an easy matter to invent excuses for seeing her, and finally, some time in the winter, he asked her in fear and trembling if she would be Mrs. Luther Wilkins.

At first she was afraid it would not be right to abandon her brother's children, but her scruples melted away before the warmth of his eloquence. Then she confessed that she was tired. "It is so long that I have had to take care of other folks, and it would seem like heaven to have some one take care of me.'

So it happened that in a little less than a year the letter to Mrs. Luther Wilkins was given to its rightful owner. "Circumstances over which I had no control have prevented your getting it before," Luther said.

"Why, it's nothing but an advertisement of some new preparation of cereals," she said, when she had opened it.

Luther looked blank.

"I see how it is," she said, after a moment's thought. "They sent to the different grocers for lists of their customers, and then sent these circulars to their wives."

"Let's keep it," said Luther softly. "If it hadn't been for that—"

"Yes, we'll keep it," said Letitia, blushing.

PANAMA'S PEARL HARVEST.

Average Value of the Gems Secured by Divers About $150,000 a Year.

The magnificent pearls which ornament the crown of Spain and which are so much admired by tourists who visit the cathedrals at Seville and Toledo were found in oyster shells in the Bay of Panama and the large strings and clusters which the Spaniards took from the Indians, both on the north and west coasts of South America, came from the same source. Pearl fishing is still carried on to a considerable extent at Panama, reports the Chicago Record. In the spring of 1899 a boy 15 years old found an oyster that concealed a jewel now offered for sale in Paris for $10,000. He received $4,000 for it from a negro speculator named Justiana. The latter brought it to Panama and sold it to Felix Erhman, the banker, for a considerable advance on that price. At the Erhman banking house the other day was seen an assortment of pearls valued all the way from $50 to $4,000, which are Panama prices, and considerably lower than those that would be asked for the same jewels in London, Paris or New York. Few pearls are sent to New York because of the duty imposed upon them by our government. Those that go are smuggled.

The annual harvest of pearls here will average a value of about $150,000. There are several firms engaged in the business—Prospero Penal, Pisa y Pisa, Arosenema Hermanos, Madura Hermanos and others. The Erhmans do no fishing, but buy pearls of speculators.

Pearl oysters are found in all parts of Panama bay. Two years ago an ordinary fisherman found one near Taboga island, not more than half a mile from the regular steamship anchorage, that contained a pearl worth $2,400, but the largest beds are about thirty miles from the city. The oysters are much larger than those found in northern waters and the shells are even larger still. The oysters are rank and coppery, but are healthful and are eaten by the natives. The smaller ones are often brought to the Panama market.

The pearl islands, as they are called, compose an archipelago on the west side of Panama bay, about thirty miles from the steamship landing. There are sixteen islands and several large rocks, with between thirty and forty little villages of negroes and mixed Indians, a population of perhaps 1,000 all told, engaged in pearl diving. The islands are low and heavily timbered and the soil is fertile. The cocoanut groves and long stretches of white beach that glisten like silver in the sun make a pretty picture. Most of the islands belong to the merchants named, who cultivate the soil as well as manage the fisheries. The largest, called Rey, which has about one-half the population, is fifteen miles long and seven broad. San Miguel—St. Michael—the chief town and headquarters of the fisheries, is nothing more than a cluster of palm-thatched huts. Several stores are built of wood and corrugated iron and a church of stone is larger and more costly than all the rest of the buildings of the town combined.

There are two methods of operating at the pearl islands in Panama bay. The owners of the oyster beds give permits to natives to fish in them upon the payment of a certain rental and a heavy percentage of the pearls recovered, and they in turn pay a heavy tax to the government. The divers can bring up all the oysters they please. The shells are valuable for mother-of-pearl, so that the time is not wasted even if they contain no gems.

The divers plunge into ten or twelve fathoms of water, for the best pearls are found in the depest beds, and bring up as many shells as they can in their arms, which their wives or assistants open in the boat. Of course only a few contain pearls, which are deformities—excrescences formed by the secretions of the oyster clinging to and accumulating upon foreign particles which have intruded into its cloister. Sometimes a tiny bit of sand lodges in the shell, and the saliva and other secretions bathe it day after day, just as they bathe the inside of the shell, and form the pearly coating it always contains. Pearls are therefore accidents, and not one oyster in a hundred contains them. The divers work for days, sometimes for weeks, without finding a single pearl, and the only reward for their labor is the shells, which are worth from 5 to 8 cents each in the New York market and from 3 to 5 cents in Panama.

Most of the pearls are small, according to the growth, and if they could be left in the water would grow larger. Some are minute, like birdshot, which are worth from $1 to $10 each. Occasionally they find one as big as a small pea, which will sell for $25 or $50. The value varies with the size and perfection. I saw a beautiful great black pear-shaped pearl at Mr. Erhman's that would have been worth thousands of dollars but for an imperfection, which reduced its value to hundreds. It can be set in a brooch with the fair side out, like we wear our best manners in company, and the world at large may admire it, but every expert will at once recognize why it was set that way.

All the Panama merchants I have named employ diving bells and send men down to the bottom of the bay to pick out the best looking shells, which are put in baskets and hauled up to the surface of the water and dumped into boats. They are paid by the month and work in gangs all day under a foreman, receiving stated wages and rations. They have no share in the jewels they find, and it is difficult for them to steal unless the whole party, foreman and all, enter into the conspiracy.

ONE ON THE FAT ENGINEER.

His Story of Meeting the Spook Train at the Glendale Crossing.

"Yes," said the fat engineer to a New York Sun man, "I've heard and read a lot about spook trains and engines, but I never had the extreme pleasure of getting next to one till the other night. It shook Murphy up so that he hasn't been able to work since, partly from nervous prostration and partly because he's too lame and sore. Every time I go out I think it will be the last trip, as I believe that spook train was a warning.

"Night before last we had done the honors on our usual 'grab train,' picking up cars quite a ways up the division, when an engine on a branch train broke down and we got chased over the branch. It was a dark, stormy night, such as you read about in the dime novels when the heavy villain or his agent chucks a cloak over the head of the handsome and innocent heroine and hustles her off to an insane asylum in an automobile.

"'It's quite a while since I've been over the branch,' I says to Murphy; 'we'll have to kinder feel our way.'

He grumbled out something, but as he was always grumbling I didn't pay much attention to him and we were soon skimming along. We had orders to meet No. 155 westbound at the junction and didn't wat to lay her out more'n was necessary. As we sakted around a curve in Glendale I was thinking what an important guy the engineer is and whistling 'My Dad's the Engineer' softly to myself when out of the darkness ahead of us a headlight loomed up, coming at us full tilt. As the branch is single track this sudden diversion had its disagreeable features. I could see the oncoming train plain as day. She had three coaches, same as we had, and was throwing sparks to beat the band.

"'Jump, Murphy, jump,' I hollered to Mike. 'No. 155 has jumped her orders. Jump for your life.'

"Then I gave one warning toot on the whistle, shut her off, soaked the air in the sinkhole, closed my eyes and waited for the crash. I would have jumped myself only I thought I didn't have time. Its surprising how quick your past life will flash before you when you're near the pearly gates, and when you sift the wheat from the chaff it's about all chaff. Then, in fancy, I was looking at the next morning's papers and saw old worn-out cuts of a railroad wreck that they had used for every train wreck in the last five years. I could see the old hulk of an engine marked with a star, under which was printed: 'This is where the brave engineer was found, faithful to his duty, dead with his hand on the throttle.'

"Just at this stage of the game I would rather have been the ice man, the gas man or any other old kind of a man, but the prospects were that I would be a dead man. All this thirty seconds I had been waiting with my eyes shut for the crash, but we seemed to be a crash shy. The train came to a stop within about 500 yards and I rubbed my eyes and looked ahead for 155, but it was nowhere in sight. I suppose you fellers will say I was asleep and dreaming, but I will lay bets that I saw that train all right and Murphy saw it, too. It was no dream. The engine was soon surrounded by the train hands firing questions at me as if I was on the witness stand.

"'Murphy, my fireman, fell off back there, that's why I stopped,' I says, for I di'n't want to tell what I had seen and let them have the holler on me. Murphy evident y hadn't looked before he leapt for a part of his blouse was fast on a hook on the tank, but they didn't have any difficulty tracing his course after they found where he struck. He had plowed a neat furrow right down to a ditch on the side of the track. He was a little the worse for wear, but still in the race and was soon on the engine.

"'Say, Murf,' I said to him, 'did you see that?'

"He replied in a scared whisper: 'You bet I did,' he says. 'I bet neither of us get home alive. It's a warning.'"

"Where did you say that was?" asked another engineer who was listening to the tale.

"Right at Glendale crossing coming east."

"Well, you and Murf are two lunkheads. If you'd kept your eyes open a few seconds after you saw the spook you'd known what it was," said the second engineer. "I got fooled there myself once. The bar of the Glendale house is right there at the crossing at right angles with the track. When they let their curtains down at night, according to law, the big, high mirror back of the bar reflects every train that goes east. Its on you I guess."

After a general guying from the stove committee the fat engineer said he didn't know anything about bars and bar rooms, he'd never been in one in his life. So they told him it was about time he inspected one and hustled into a nearby cafe where he stood the shot.

CAN'T DRINK IN MODERATION.

Bear that Has the Same Lamentable Weakness as Some Men.

"Dick," the Russian brown bear in Lincoln park, is in disgrace, reports the Chicago Inter Ocean. Some admirer of the bruin family pushed a bottle of pure rye whisky through the bars of "Dick's" cage on Monday evening. The bear drank the liquor and there was trouble the rest of the night, for he kept all the other bears of his household awake and also those in the flat above.

The matter of "Dick's" fall from grace was the subject of grave consideration before the Lincoln park board yesterday. The upshot of it was a decision that the bear should be ostracised from the society of his mates. One of the commissioners suggested the gold cure, but this was deemed impracticable. A special cage will be built for him and he will be kept in solitary confinement and away from temptation.

Cy De Vry, the animal keeper, says that when "Dick" is sober he is a good bear, but the minute he tastes liquor he loses control of himself and gives full swing to his appetite. When in his cups "Dick" claws the other bears, chews the bars of his cage and becomes generally disreputable. He also tries to bite imaginary foes, who, he thinks, are surrounding him.

Three weeks ago the bear fell to thinking about his former free and untrammeled life in a gypsy camp and resolved to change the scenery of his environment. He scaled a tall, iron-picketed fence and led a number of keepers, citizens and policemen an exciting chase through the flower gardens.

Yesterday morning, after his nightly carousal, "Dick's" nervous system was in a shocking condition. In his delirium he made a break for freedom. Hardly had his long, broad feet begun to dig up chunks of the gravel pathway before a lasso from the hands of Keeper Cy De Vry went sailing over the head of bruin and settled around his neck. Then Park Policeman Guard and Keeper De Vry braced themselves at the other end of the rope and the bear's second trip in the open was brought to an abrupt close.

He reared on his haunches, turned completely over, sommersault fashion, and struck the ground on his side with a thud. It was a dazed and degraded bear that was dragged back to the pit. The animal had taken the same method of egress as on the first occasion, when he scaled the rock wall and nimbly clambered over a guard of sharpened iron bars which have appalled generations of bears not of the gypsy variety.

COLOR PRINTING MACHINE.

A Russian Invention Which Applies All the Colors at One Time.

A contribution to the rapidly growing list of color printing machines comes from Russia, the invention of Ivan Orloff, a government engineer. The Orloff machine puts on all the colors at one time, instead of applying one at a time as the other becomes dry, which is the practice with the ordinary flat color printing machine. The blocks which take the different colors are fixed to a large cylinder. Each block receives the supply of colored ink intended for it, and as the cylinder revolves the ink on each block is transferred to a composition roller very similar to an ordinary inking roller. After the colors, each in its proper position, are transferred to the roller, an engraved block or form follows and receives a perfect impression from the composition roller. Thus impressed, the form passes on and comes in contact with the paper on the impression cylinder, where it prints all the colors at one operation. It takes only one revolution of the cylinder to effect the whole of these various transfers. The number of colors that can be used is limited only by the number of blocks and the size of the machine. It is stated that 1,000 finished impressions per hour can be turned out by this machine. It had a somewhat singular origin, having been designed for the Russian government to print multi-colored patterns for bank notes.

COMPOUND PROFITS.

Mr. Skinner—I just sold the last of those suburban houses I put up.
Miss Weaver—What are you going to do with all the money?
Mr. Skinner—Invest it in quinine and sell it to the purchasers of the houses as soon as they have caught the malaria.